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ABSTRACT

What is pleasing about hypertext is what has always been pleasing about genre fiction: the creative process of reading. Genre novels are written to a formula--and often called formula fiction. Critics say they are written to make money and to make money only. According to C. S. Lewis, they "rot the mind." If looked at from the standpoint of rhetoric, however, the critic may see something besides junk and formula. It must be understood that the value or worth of a piece of fiction is a slippery and subjective matter, depending on the reader's orientation and reading habits. Further, those who read popular fiction are not a separate category of readers; they are the same group that reads canonical works. The truth is that "we" are the readers that C. S. Lewis and others are complaining about. To understand a popular genre, the reader must not read one or two books from that genre but hundreds. Immersed in the genre, the reader finds himself/herself reading for difference, not similarity; reading for form and the variations in that form. This interest in variation may explain why genre readers see complexity while critics do not. For the genre reader, genre reading is, like hypertext, intertexual, multivocal; the authority shifts from author, to genre, to the reader; the texts have no fixed beginnings or ends, as they can be read in any order. (Contains 16 references.) (TB)

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Formula Fiction and Hypertext

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Let me begin by reading two quotes. The first is from a book review of a horror novel:

> Pretentious, tasteless, abominably written, redundant pastiche of superficial theology, comic book psychology, Grade C movie dialogue and Grade Z scatology. In short, it'll be a best seller. (Bear)

The second is from a review of a romance novel (in the form of hypertext):

> " . . . a stunning achievement of *ecriture feminine* in both form and aesthetic. The rhythm of the "buzz-daze" . . . is nothing less than [the author's] "vision of a language released from the coordinates of space/time." (Sainsbury)

I don't think I'd be stretching any truths to say that both quotes are typical of attitudes towards their respective subjects.

Horror novels, like mysteries, science fiction, and especially modern romance novels, are the books we love to make fun of. We may read them, but we generally stress that they are "candy for the mind," "literary junk food," "mental masturbation."

Hypertext, on the other hand, signals the transformation of reading and writing, the embodiment and realization of postmodern literary theory. George Landow calls hypertext

> "the next major shift in information technology after the development of the printed book. . . . [which] promises . . . to produce effects on our culture . . . just as radical as those produced by Gutenberg's movable type." (19)

The contrast between these two attitudes is ironic, because what pleases us about hypertext is pretty much the same thing that has always pleased us

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about genre fiction: the creative process of reading. When we focus on the object of our pleasure, the book or the computer, this fact is hidden to us. But when we turn to rhetorical theory, looking at actions and purposes, and the way we use texts, the similarities are perfectly clear.

Tonight, I'm going to talk about the activity of reading genre fiction, and show how it is similar to the activity of reading hypertext. My main attention will be to the books--hypertext will be used as a metaphor to help explain reading processes.

At the same time, I hope to save formula fiction from a little of the scorn it usually receives, and help those of us who enjoy reading these novels feel a little bit better about doing so.

Let me stop for a minute and define terms. The "hypertext" I'm primarily talking about is author-created, read-only hypertext (though I believe my comments will also apply to those texts which allows readers to add links).

Here's THE WAY HYPERTEXT WORKS:

* Each box or "node " equals a chunk of information (could be words, images, sound, a combination). Connections between boxes are called "links". You select links to follow in different ways--one way is by pointing your mouse at them and clicking.
* Readers start at any node, and travel along any link they choose. From the next node, they choose another link, and so on, ending only when they've read enough.
* Another way to think of hypertext is to picture a typical page of text. When we see a footnote on a printed page, we can choose to look up the text it refers to. With a hypertext, you can simply click on that footnote, and the

entire article will appear. Depending on the computer you're using, you can have both articles appear on the screen. You can have footnotes that simply call up articles that have other footnotes--anyone who has surfed the web has experienced some of these possibilities.

The novels I'm talking about are popular genre novels--horror, mystery, science fiction, romance--also called "formula fiction" or "category fiction." These novels bear a double burden: not only are they widely read (meaning they appeal to the "lowest common denominator" rather than to people with taste), they are (supposedly) written to a formula. So critics charge that these books are:

> designed by marketing committee only to make money
> characterized by predictable plots, cardboard characters, and naive uncritical themes
> the same story over and over again.

Even worse is what these novels supposedly do to you. You get addicted. They rot your mind. They lull you into passively accepting the status quo, rather than critiquing it.

CS Lewis describes such readers in his book *An Experiment in Criticism*:

> "We have all known women who remembered a novel so dimly that they had to stand for half an hour in the library skimming through it before they were certain they had once read it. But the moment they became certain they rejected it immediately. It was for them dead, like a burnt-out match, an old railway ticket, or yesterday's paper; they had already used it. Those who read great works, on the other hand, will read the same work ten, twenty or thirty times during the course of their life." (2)

These women have obviously had their intellects dulled by continuous exposure to the wrong sort of book. The books aren't good enough to be reread, or unique enough to be recognized in the library. And the women aren't bright enough to choose something better. We expect to find them doing laundry, or perhaps soaking in the tub, or maybe watching soap

operas--not critiquing our notions of authority and textuality, or working toward a radical transformation of our culture's notions of romance.

Obviously, educated, discriminating readers like those of us in this room stay away from this stuff for our own protection! (Unless we can show that we're not just "drinking it in," but only passing time on the plane. Or unless we can make a case for the book's being Literature, with a capital "L," and not formula fiction at all.)

Aside from these special situations, genre novels are just bad news . . . until we look at them from the standpoint of rhetoric. After all, we know that people aren't just passive pawns of language--we use language to do things. We don't just go through the motions--we act (to use Kenneth Burke's terminology) (*Language as Symbolic Action* 1040).

Burke notes that writing

> "is a *constitutive* act--and after the act of its composition by a poet who had acted in a particular temporal scene, it survives as an objective structure, capable of being examined in itself, in temporal scenes quite different from the scene of its composition, and by agents quite different from the agent who originally enacted it." (*Grammar of Motives* 482)

Once a piece of writing is removed from its original scene, its meaning is even more dependent upon the interpretation of the reader. Thus reading, also, becomes a constitutive act.

Because of this, we can choose how we read texts, according to our own purposes.

One piece of evidence for this is that we can do many kinds of reading with any text--can read cookbook for pleasure. Can study cookbook as "text." Nonfiction can read like a story (*Case Closed*, about the JFK assassination). Fiction can be a history lesson (historical romances).

Another piece of evidence is that texts move in and out of the canon. Dickens once was "pop culture" but now is in the canon. Steinbeck was in the canon, now we may be more likely to read his books "for pleasure." (A colleague of mine believes that Jane Austen's books are facing the same fate.)

Most importantly, "those who read great works" are very likely the exact same people who read lesser works.

A. Szalai's 1972 study *The Use of Time*, an eight-year project involving 27,000 people in 11 countries and three continents, revealed that reading "is a habit distributed bimodally in the population: either one is hooked on book reading and reads a lot, or one isn't and reads very little" (Nell 21). Readers read everything, from novels to cereal boxes; nonreaders just don't read.

Other studies support these findings, noting that roughly 83% to 96% "of the variance of whatever constitutes adult reading habits has yet to be explained" (Kling 67).

Reading habits are not driven by sex, race, income, or education (though more habitual readers are women) (Kling).

And reading interests are also not determined by education or occupation (M. Cecil Smith).

So statistically, the people who only read junk because they don't know better just don't exist.

Now we know the truth--WE are the readers that CS Lewis and others have been complaining about! We know that WE wouldn't find pleasure in reading the exact same story over and over again. WE haven't let our brains rot. WE can read genre fiction and still be pretty critical of the world around us.

So what's happening when we read genre fiction? To answer that question, let's go back to our web: (SEE HANDOUT)

Picture each of these nodes as a paperback, and let the web symbolize a genre. Each of these books alludes to the others. New nodes are constantly added as new books are published. We can read the books in any order. Our concept of a genre is defined by the connections/similarities we perceive between books. This means that a genre is a fuzzy category, without strict boundaries (and anyone who has looked for a definition of "science fiction" can attest to the truth of this).

Thomas J. Roberts and others have said that you need to read at least 200 books in a genre to be conversant with it. That's a *minimum* of 200 books. Seems like a lot of books--except when you consider how genre fiction is usually read. It's not at all uncommon for a mystery fan, a horror fan, a science fiction fan, to read a book a week, even several books a week. Romance readers might read 60 books a month. At that rate, readers gain genre knowledge pretty quickly.

These kinds of reading habits are well-known to publishers, who don't often advertise what they call "category" titles because their readers will find the books. Only a few superbig authors will get star treatment (Steven King, Sue Grafton, Isaac Asimov, Jackie Collins). Most category paperbacks are thrust into the world with little or no fanfare.

When we read all these paperbacks, instead of looking for the similarities between books in a category, we read for the differences. We read against a backdrop of similar books. Thomas J. Roberts calls this "reading by genre." I think of it as reading HORIZONTALLY (looking across the bookscape) rather than VERTICALLY (looking deeply into one book).

The process is much like going on a nature walk--what are you going to see that you haven't seen before? More rocks, more trees, more birds. But people who take the same walk every day look for the differences--these buds are more open today than yesterday, there a bird has finished building her next, last night's storm has tossed down some branches.

As Randall Roorda has pointed out, reading any narrative

> "concerns a certain suspension of expectation . . . . It's the expectation of the bear that went over the mountain which Annie Dillard takes as her own: "to see what he could see." What you're likely to see, as Dillard knows, is "more of the same," same mountains, same trees. But with expectation suspended, sameness is punctuated with the unprecedented; that is, with moments of recognition. What has never happened to you may happen, and be recognized as that which perennially happens." (9)

These changing expectations are illuminated by what Kenneth Burke terms the "psychology of information" and the "psychology of form."

The "Psychology of Information" emphasizes the "giving of information." When we're looking for new information, honestly having no clue about what will happen next, the psychology of information is at work.

The "Psychology of Form" emphasizes the "creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (*Counter-Statement* 31). When we know what to expect, when we know there will be a happy ending and we want to know how the story works out to get us to that happy ending, that's the psychology of form.

We choose which psychology will apply when we read. The psychology of form is uppermost when we read formula fiction.

The process of reading, looking for the ways a particular narrative plays out, is very pleasurable, just like taking a walk in the woods. But you need to have familiarity with the general terrain in order to do it.

When we look for complexity between the covers of a single volume, we may not be able to find the depth of character we'd expect from a literary book. When we pay attention to differences between books, subtle variations in plot are revealed, two-dimensional characters become more complex, and innovation is foregrounded.

An example is what happens with characters in books like Sue Grafton's "alphabet" mysteries (*"A" is for Alibi*, *"B" is for Burglar*, etc.). These books are usually termed hard-boiled detective novels, though Grafton does play with the genre by making her detective a woman (named Kinsey Milhone). We're familiar enough, perhaps, with hard-boiled detectives to appreciate how changing the gender adds nuances of Kinsey's character. But Grafton's other repeated characters seem more two-dimensional, at least on first reading.

Like Henry Pitts, Kinsey's landlord. He's an 81-year-old retired baker, who bakes stuff and designs crossword puzzles in his spare time. Kinsey thinks he's really sexy--she calls him an "octogenarian hunk."

This hunk of manhood can be found sunning himself on the patio or baking in the kitchen. When Kinsey comes home, Henry is waiting with brownies; when she leaves on a case, Henry stays behind. If you read only one of these novels, you might conclude that Henry might as well be an apartment furnishing. In fact Kinsey says, "For two hundred dollars a month, I have everything I want, including a debonair 81-year-old landlord named Henry Pitts" (*Burglar* 75).

But when we read more of these books, we see more sides of Henry's character. In one book, he falls in love with a swindler, and we see that his dignified reserve is a way of keeping painful emotions in check. In another, his older brother falls in love, and Henry disapproves--Kinsey thinks he must

have acted the same way at age 8, with "sullen-younger-brother belligerence" (240)

A mystery reader can also compare Henry to the long-suffering beautiful secretaries of other hard-boiled detectives. So characters like Henry develop in more than two dimensions, but you have to read horizontally to recognize this.

This explains how readers of genres can see complexity where literary critics might not. They're looking in different directions.

The points that have brought praise to hypertext are also true of genre fiction :

1,2. They're both fundamentally intertextual and fundamentally multivocal (entirely constituted by perceived relationships between texts)

3. They have no fixed top or bottom, beginning or end (begins with the first thing you read, and never ends)

4. Their boundaries, their insides and outsides, are blurred.

5. Within them, texts can become dispersed, or atomized. For example, Isaac Asimov's short story "Helen O'Loy" may seem more like a futuristic romance than SF.

6. They are infinitely de-centerable and re-centerable by the reader. One reader may define SF to include "hard" sf and to exclude fantasy. For another, Tolkeinesque creation of new worlds is better than "space operas" which focus on guns and warships.

7. In them, authority shifts from author, to the genre, to the reader's choices within the genre. Heinlein can be interpreted just as his novels are interpreted. Fans can reshape the experience for other fans (fanzines, reader's clubs, etc.)

8. When reading in them, the sense of being involved in a network never disappears; the rest of the genre forms an inescapable context for the reading. However, this inescapable context is always changing, always able to accept new elements, always willing to accommodate new links. So the context can never "fix" the reading.

Furthermore, the context is made up of the choices readers makes as we read. WE choose what elements will be included in the genre, WE establish the context and sequence of links, WE can change our minds and make different choices at any point. This is not "letting our brains rot," but a complex, active process carried out by skilled readers.

Horizontal and vertical readings are not bound to specific texts. We can enjoy both kinds of reading with any text we choose. I've read many SF texts which would yield much to a traditional literary analysis. I've read many literary texts which resonate with other texts--we see perceived links between *Crime and Punishment* and detective stories, *Frankenstein* and horror, *Dr. Faustus* and SF, *Pride and Prejudice* and romance, etc. And we can perceive other kinds of connections: Harriet Hawkins has written about her perceived connections between *King Lear* and *King Kong*, for example.

But if we only pay attention to one kind of reading, we miss an entire dimension of an experience.

Hypertext fans remind us that literature can't be judged by its format (electronic or print). We already know that you can't judge a book by its cover. And the next time someone sees us reading a trashy novel, or clicking our way through a trashy hypertext . . . well, we can let them know that you can't judge a reader by the book.

c1996 Beth Rapp Young

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